

L.A. Transit Worker on Explosion at BYD Bus Factory

For Union Control of Safety and Training!

The following is a *Workers Vanguard* interview of an ATU Local 1277 militant at L.A. Metro. He is a member of the Committee for One Fighting Transit Union (COFTU), which strives to strengthen the three major Metro unions—the ATU, TCU and SMART—crucially including by merging them into one. The interview provides a firsthand account of a devastating explosion that occurred on December 4 at Metro supplier BYD's electric bus manufacturing facility in Lancaster, California. One BYD worker who suffered severe burns has yet to return to work, and it is unclear if he ever will be able to.

As explained in the interview, this accident stemmed from chronic safety violations at BYD. COFTU led an effort to address this issue at the January ATU Local 1277 meetings. The COFTU-initiated motion adopted at these meetings stress that “leaving control of safety in the hands of the company rather than the union is deadly.” This is true of BYD and Metro alike. COFTU's initiative demonstrates how workers can mobilize to advance the struggle to enforce safety in the workplace. We agree with COFTU when they say: the unions must exercise their power and **shut down** unsafe work!

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WV: What happened at the BYD bus factory in Lancaster last December?

Joe: I was doing a routine procurement inspection inside a bus with a co-worker of mine, and we realized there was someone on top of the bus. No one's supposed to be on the bus but us when we're doing these inspections. Suddenly, there was a huge explosion—a huge fireball outside at the rear of the bus. We jumped off the bus, and I heard a scream, like a death scream. I saw a young worker engulfed in flames, so I ran to the back of the bus as he was trying to pat out the fire, but it wouldn't go out. He tried to get off the top of the bus onto the scaffolding next to him, but tumbled down the stairs of the scaffolding to the ground. I took my jacket off, but I realized that it was polyester, and it wouldn't be a good idea to pat him down with it

because it was gonna melt.

A woman working with him helped pat him down, and she got the fire out. There was a lot of smoke and fire extinguisher gas. While I was with him on the ground, doing what I could to help put out the fire, I realized there was no one around him except his co-workers; there was no management, no supervision, nobody. And so, no one came with a first-aid kit until the fire was out.

WV: What do you think caused this accident?

Joe: There's a couple of things. One, the young worker—I found out his name is Jose Sosa—should not have been assigned to work up there on top of the bus. The policy is when we from L.A. Metro are on the bus inspecting it, nobody else is supposed to be there. But they had to get up there and rush to get the task done because we had previously inspected this bus and had written up a few items that needed to be corrected. In an effort to expedite these corrections, they had us inspect it; but at the same time, they had BYD factory workers perform some repairs. That's the first mistake. The other thing is, BYD workers didn't have any protective gear on. They come to work with basically their own street clothes: Levi's and a t-shirt or whatever, and their work shoes.

This young worker actually worked on a different part of the assembly line, where they install high-voltage cables. But that part of the assembly line works on cold assemblies. In other words, they don't have any batteries on them yet. He's used to installing cables that aren't hot or live. But I was told that he was called over to correct the installation of the cables on the bus that we were inspecting. He may have known how to do that, but not live, not with a hot bus, not with a bus that is fully assembled and ready to go with the batteries installed. When the battery's hot, there's a whole shutdown procedure that you have to follow. And then once that's done, you have to check it to make sure that it's actually shut down and make sure that what you're working on is cold. I believe that's what caused the accident—that this young worker probably wasn't trained on how to

Los Angeles Spartacist League

(213) 380-8239 • iclfi.org • slsycla@sbcglobal.net • X @WorkersVanguard

Box 29574, Los Feliz Sta., Los Angeles, CA 90029

work on the bus when it's hot and fully assembled and charged.

I thought the whole bus was going to explode. I thought the whole factory was going to explode because maybe there was going to be a chain reaction. And I hadn't been informed about an evacuation procedure in the event of emergency. I hadn't been informed about where first aid is, who's responsible for first aid, the whole emergency event procedure, nothing.

WV: *What are conditions like at BYD?*

Joe: I was surprised. BYD is a major manufacturer of buses used around the world. But you wouldn't know it looking at it. It's very chaotic—one of the first things you notice when you walk in is the workers aren't in uniform, and they're not in safety gear. Last summer, workers there staged a sick-out for one day in opposition to the terrible conditions.

It's a difficult job to assemble a modern transit bus. Everything's fitted in just so in a certain way, making the job difficult. I was impressed with the workers, who have figured out how to do things when the company basically gives them a job and leaves them to their own devices.

WV: *What do you think needs to be done to make sure that such accidents don't happen again?*

Joe: When workers rely on the company to take care of their safety, their training, it always falls short. What the company might have put together for situations like this might look good on paper, but when something actually occurs, that's a whole different thing. It highlights the flaws in the general plan. So, because of that, you can't depend on the company.

As a union worker, I believe that in a union facility, the union needs to take charge of training and the procedures that need to be carried out, the protocols that need to be followed. Because the union's interest in what the worker does is not the same as the company's. The unions look out for the worker, and the company looks out for the company. If you depend on the company to look out for your welfare, there's a huge risk.

When the accident happened, I shouted up to the [supervision and management offices], "Where's the first aid?" They looked right back at me and said, "We don't know."

WV: *This accident happened at BYD, and you're at L.A. Metro. Why should L.A. Metro workers care about what happens at BYD?*

Joe: BYD's a union shop. SMART Local 105. Just like the workers at L.A. Metro, we're part of the same class. Their interests are our interests. What we may be able to establish at Metro because we're the more well-established union in the area can be an example of how things could or should be done. And it shows worker solidarity when you support any worker—unionized worker, documented worker, undocumented worker—looking out for the interests of somebody that is not even in your workplace.

Metro workers are asked to work at any number of places throughout L.A. County. We work at a lot of different companies and facilities. And it's in the interest of the Metro employ-

ees to have some control over the safety of the places where they work—at a Metro facility or anywhere else. At BYD, we had no say in safety guidelines, procedures, evacuation. Metro workers don't want to go into an unsafe situation; and if it is unsafe, we have to be able to stop what we're doing and remove ourselves.

Now that brings us to the question, who decides these things? Who decides what's safe or not safe? It has to be the union. The union needs to call the shots, develop the procedures and the guidelines and determine what equipment is necessary to work in a safe environment.

Here's where it gets tough. We have a union that helps to a certain point, but often the union leadership cooperates with Metro to speed up things or cut corners, particularly when it comes to safety.

WV: *What needs to happen to change this situation?*

Joe: I'm a member of the Committee for One Fighting Transit Union (COFTU) at Metro. We put forward a motion at a recent ATU meeting that passed. One of the things we decided was to donate \$1,000 to Jose, the BYD worker who was burned badly. He was in the hospital for quite some time recovering from his burns. The motion also said that workers must be able to stop working in situations they identify as unsafe, that this has to be backed up by the union deliberately and directly and that SMART Local 105 at BYD ought to do the same thing. We also decided to put together a team of ATU and SMART workers to inspect BYD's facilities.

And right now, what we have is a safety committee with ten members, but more than half of them are management and supervision, so that means they have control over safety. That's why another union brother put forward a motion calling for our ATU local to establish a safety committee authorized to shut down specific work in unsafe conditions. This motion also passed.

But it's been months, and all the leadership has done is post up sign-up sheets for members to join the safety committee. But the way they describe the committee on the sheets is not at all what was in the motion. It just says it will be made up of "helpful ATU 1277 members who will provide assistance to other workers in facilitating a safe work environment...willing to learn, teach, and assist those in need of securing such."

And also, the leadership says the committee can't shut down unsafe work, even though that's what's in the motion that passed. At every step, no matter what is done or said, their response is, "No, we can't do this because of either some law or some rule—or it's just a bad idea." It's the complete opposite of what you would expect from a leadership that has the interests of the workers in mind. It's difficult for me to wrap my head around the fact that the leadership could betray the union this way.

It's a big problem with the leadership. They don't wanna really put any teeth in it. It's pretty weak what they're suggesting. What they're saying is, "Oh, we can just talk to people" and not have any real effect. The leadership deliberately misguides the membership away from understanding the power the union can have.

Because of the leadership's resistance, the membership will have to fight to give the committee real union power.



COMMITTEE FOR ONE FIGHTING TRANSIT UNION

linktr.ee/foroneunion • onefightingunion@gmail.com
 X @foroneunion • @foroneunion • @Committee for One Fighting Transit Union

